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GERMANY AND THE EMPLOYMENT OF HUNGARIAN TROOPS ON THE EASTERN FRONT AND IN THE BALKANS

Germany & the employment of Hungarian troops on the Eastern front and in the Balkans

Description

The report discusses the extent of participation of Hungarian troops on the Russian front since the outbreak of hostilities and the probability of their participation on Balkan fronts.

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Germany and the Employment of Hungarian Troops on the Eastern Front and in the Balkans

Summary

During the first part of the Russian campaign, a strong Hungarian army was actively engaged in fighting at the Eastern Front; the maximum participation was about 200,000 men. After the Voronezh disaster, where half of this number and the total heavy equipment was lost, only about 50,000 troops remained in the East for service in the rear. Since then the Hungarian government has resisted all German demands for additional troops, but has not succeeded in getting these occupation troops back to Hungary; they have recently again become involved in active fighting. Since the summer of 1941, Hungary has refrained from active military action in the Balkans, and recent rumors regarding the assignment of considerable Hungarian forces to German command in the Balkans appear to be unfounded. On November 26, 1943 Deputy Zsilinsky, the leader of the Small Holders Party, declared in parliament in a speech greeted with applause by the opposition that after the capitulation of Italy Hungary should consider herself no longer bound by the Tripartite Pact, but should try to make peace. He demanded -- as an indication of Hungary's separation from the Axis war -- that all the Hungarian troops still at the Eastern front, should be immediately withdrawn. 1/ This was the first time that the opposition openly demanded the liquidation of the Eastern front; Zsilinsky's speech raises the question to what extent a withdrawal of Hungarian troops from the Eastern front would be of practical importance and would have influence on the political and military situation.

1. N. Y. Times, Nov. 29, 1943.

A.

1. Although Hungary had used the opportunity of the German invasion into Yugoslavia to snatch some Yugoslavian territory, Hungary's real participation in World War II began with her declaration of war against Russia. The reason for Hungary's part in the war against Russia was mainly that Hungary (which had maintained a somewhat reserved and hesitating attitude during the first year of the war), did not want to be excluded from a share in the redistribution of European territories which Germany was undertaking. In particular, Hungary was afraid, if she did not take an active part in the war, that Germany would favor the claims of Rumania, Hungary's old rival.

After the Russian bombing of Hungarian cities in 1942 the Hungarian government found an additional reason to explain the presence of Hungarian troops on the Eastern Front, i.e., self defense forced upon it by the enemy.

2. Hungary's original military contribution to Germany's eastern front amounted to 50,000 men. During 1942 the Germans applied high pressure to have the Hungarian contribution increased to 500,000, but could not get more than 200,000. 1/ Ever since, the amount of Hungarian military support to the German campaign in Russia has been a sore point in the relations between Budapest and Berlin, and the Nazis have been trying to bring to power in Hungary men more subservient to German wishes than the Kallay government. During the summer of 1942, the morale of the Hungarian troops, which had been excellent at the beginning of the campaign, began to deteriorate. Considerable publicity was given to the fact that in August 1942, after the summer recess of the Hungarian Parliament, about 40 deputies led by Imredy (The Arrow Cross leader), joined the Army to fight Bolshevism on the Eastern Front. At the same time, however, complaints of Hungarian soldiers about the inadequacy of their armament are reported; even the ardor of Nazi-sympathizing officers was said to have cooled off, many Hungarian officers were reported to have been arrested for supporting Serb, Russian and Polish guerrillas. 2/

The deep impression, made by the heavy losses was not offset by official explanations that the 14,000 casualties during the last 4 ½ months of 1942 compare extremely favorably with losses suffered on the 1915 Russian front. 3/ Rumors regarding disunity among German, Hungarian and Rumanian troops, and regarding complaints against the arrogant behaviour of the German officers spread widely.

This deterioration of army morale was probably a contributory factor in the disastrous defeat, which the Hungarian troops fighting as an individual

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1. The Star, Washington, Jan. 15, 1942.
2. N.Y. Times, July 15, 1942. CID # 36572.
3. Bern wire, Jan. 12, 1943 quoting MTI Jan. 10, 1943.

army unit suffered near Voronezh between January 27 and February 6, 1943. It is a fact that out of 150,000 front line troops 100,000 were lost,- wounded, killed or captured. Although these figures were long denied by official statements in the Hungarian Press, there were facts which couldn't be hidden, like the extension of the furlough of all soldiers on leave at the end of January, because of the jamming of troop-trains, and the suspension of consignment parcels to all field post numbers beginning with the number 2, and these facts gave the Hungarian public insight in the seriousness of the situation.

3. After the Voronezh defeat, the Hungarian combat forces were withdrawn from the front and returned to Hungary. Only 50,000 men remained in the East, and they were chiefly used in the rear for communication and security services. This changed situation is clearly reflected in the Hungarian press. In 1942 the Hungarian newspapers had reported the glorious achievements of the Hungarian soldiers on the Eastern Front in sensational headlines almost overshadowing the role played by German troops, but these reports were discontinued in the summer of 1943.

4. This withdrawal of Hungarian combat forces has been very much opposed by the German Government; the Nazis have steadily pressing for Hungarian reinforcements. In April 1943 the Regent Horthy visited Hitler but purposely neglected to take with him any responsible member of his cabinet and thus could not commit himself to provide additional troops. 1/ In August the Defense Minister Csatay visited Hitler's Headquarters; during this visit German news emphasized the activities of Hungarian aviation on the Eastern front and of ground forces on the partisan fronts, but Hungarian news emphatically denied that Csatay's visit was necessitated by current events, and had anything to do with German demands for Hungarian reinforcements. 2/ When in consequence of the German retreats and by order of a German commander Hungarian occupation troops were used as combat forces in fighting around Kiev despite promises given to Chief of Staff Szombathelyi during his visit to Hitler's Headquarters in October 1943, Szombatholyi immediately visited the German commander of the Kiev region and demanded the return of all Hungarian troops. 3/

By the end of 1943 the remaining troops were placed among German units in small groups and it is also reported that units of 200 men were sent to the front whenever the Hungarian government refused to send additional troops. However the total number of Hungarian troops on the Eastern front is now much less than 50,000. 4/ The whole development was summed up in a declaration which Prime Minister Kallay made on November 13. He said that when he took over the government he inherited

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1. CID # 36572
2. Bern wire # 5059, Aug. 18, 1943 & 5184 Aug. 23, 1943 quoting Budapest dispatches
3. OSS # 24840, Nov. 17, 1943.
4. OSS " 25146, Nov. 26, 1943. OSS source S # A-18130-c Dec. 31, 1943.

a fait accompli and had to support the Eastern front; since then he must have had to draw certain conclusions from losses in men and material; circumstances have changed, and now all forces are needed to strengthen the Hungarian border. 1/

5. How fast the remaining Hungarian occupation troops will be pulled out of Russia remains to be seen, however. Apparently no immediate action is expected as a recent official dispatch merely denies the rumors that Hungarian troops have been in action on the Eastern Front and claims that Hungarian troops still in Russia are used merely for security duties in occupied territories and are nowhere in action on the front lines. 2/ However, the number of troops remaining in the East is negligible as compared with troop concentration along Hungary's frontiers, and it seems that by now Hungary has nearly liquidated her Russian campaign. The contrast between Kallay and Zsilinsky regarding this question can perhaps be brought into a formula: whereas Kallay wished to see the liquidation of the Eastern Front consummated as silently as possible so that the outbreak of an open conflict with Germany will be avoided, Zsilinsky wanted Hungary to make a gesture which will clearly signify the end of the alliance with Germany.

B.

With the war approaching the Balkans, the extent of active participation to be expected from Hungarian military forces in this theatre will be increasingly important. In 1941, Hungarian troops fought in Yugoslavia, and Germany's Balkan campaign was considerably supported and facilitated by Hungary. However, after Hungary had acquired her share of Yugoslavian territory, Hungary took no further part in the Balkan campaigns or in the occupation of Serbia, and this was certainly done in full agreement with the Axis powers, which were not willing to allow Hungary a role in the reorganization of the Balkans.

However, when the outcome of the war became doubtful, the Hungarian government began to take the attitude that Hungary was involved in war with Russia, but had no quarrel with England or the United States, and intimated that her abstention from military action in the Balkans was conscious policy, caused by her unwillingness to intervene in a sphere where England and America were interested. It was even explained that Hungary had marched into Yugoslavia only after Yugoslavia's collapse in order to save territories from German occupation.

With the Italian surrender, the question of the extent to which Germany could replace Italian troops by satellite and particularly Hungarian forces became acute.

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1. FCC daily report Nov. 15, 1943 quoting Hungarian Press Service and BBC from Cairo.
2. FCC ticker quoting Budapest (Press) Nov. 27, 1943.

There are various reports that, as a result of German pressure, Hungary agreed to take over a large zone of occupation in the Balkans. The most detailed of these reports says that, in September, an agreement was reached between Germany and Hungary, by which fifteen divisions would be placed at the disposal of the German High Command, that five divisions would be used in Serbia against the guerrillas and that permission would be given to Hungarian troops to cross into Croatia. 1/

The Hungarian Government has emphatically denied that it intends to take over a more active role in the Balkans. In addition, no appearance of Hungarian troops in the Balkans has been reported, and more recent reports are inclined to assume that the information about such a German-Hungarian agreement was untrue.

The basis of these reports and rumors seems to have been that there was strong German pressure for active participation of Hungarian forces in the Balkan theatre. Moreover the partisans have become active in the territories annexed by Hungary from Yugoslavia, and in fighting and pursuing them, Hungarian forces seem to have crossed the borders, and negotiations seem to have taken place on these questions of frontier violations. That fifteen or twenty Hungarian divisions are now employed in the Balkans seems most unlikely on the basis of present indications. At a time when it is the evident interest of the Hungarian government to be as strong as possible at home, it can hardly risk sending outside Hungary which in size would comprise more than two-thirds of the Hungarian army. Moreover, active participation in the Balkans would be against the line of policy which the Hungarian Government has pursued in the recent year; it seems likely that the Hungarian Government would resort to a change in this line of policy only if it were convinced that no separate agreement with the Anglo-American powers is possible and that it will have to fight this war on the side of Germany to the bitter end.

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1. Intelligence Report No. 35 -- Balkan Section.